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Paping, R.F.J.

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# **Gender and the intergenerational transfer of property and social position in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century northern Dutch countryside**

*Richard Paping*

## **Abstract**

The 18th century Dutch "Ommelanden" was a relatively very modern market-oriented society. Intergenerational social mobility proved to be high, with more than half the individuals changing class, and only small gender differences. Inasmuch as children in most cases tended to marry well before they received an inheritance, personal capabilities played a mayor role. Direct succession was of limited importance. About a third of the transfers of farms and of other professional properties (workshops, inns, shops) was from parents to children. For farms about one third was handed over to remarrying widows and widowers and about one third was sold. Significantly more sons than daughters succeeded their parents, but parental succession was not a male prerogative and also daughters received an equal share of the inheritance in money. Although social background was helpful in securing a good position after marriage, it was by no means decisive for one's opportunities in this wealthy capitalistic region. Presumably, personal virtues of both males and females were also of great importance.

## **Introduction**

Myths on past transfer of property and social position between generations are widespread in daily life. One of the strongest is the gendered norm of the (oldest, sometimes youngest) son following in the footsteps of his father (Hajnal, 1965; examples: Ferrer Alos 2005; Dribe and Lundh 2005; Moring 2007; Pozsgai 2007), which can partly be related to customs of primogeniture in Great Britain, Catalonia, Scandinavia and Central Europe (Thirsk 1976). Daughters are supposed to have had chances to succeed only if there were no sons available. Their position must have depended heavily on the resources of the partner they married, which weakened their overall position in the household. In this case female upward and downward social mobility tend to be higher, as the social position of a couple is less related to the social background of the bride. Succession from one generation to the next is suggested to be the main way property (and social positions) was transferred (e.g. Sabeian 1990: on Neckarhausen in

Southern Germany; de Haan 1994: on farms in the eastern Netherlands). In this way families usually lived in the same building for generations. In a society with a preference for nuclear family households, this continuity in (male) lineage logically resulted in late marriages, because couples first had to secure a livelihood (Fertig 2005). In this article I will use the case of the Groningen Ommelanden (hinterland) in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century to test this myth of continuity of (male) lineages for a very prosperous pre-industrial rural society. How large were the chances of intergenerational mobility for males and females and what does this mean for the position of women?

Though peripheral, the Dutch Ommelanden with its very fertile clay grounds and well developed money economy was a part of the extremely wealthy coastal Dutch region. It had about 50,000 inhabitants in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and was characterized by market-oriented farming (mostly medium sized farms of 10 to 50 hectare) and a wide range of non-agricultural activities for the local market, despite the vicinity of the large city of Groningen (23,000 inhabitants). Three important economic groups can be identified: 1. farmers, 2. landless labourers, 3. artisans, shopkeepers, schoolmasters and others working mainly outside agriculture (Paping 1995). The nobility, although financially quite influential until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was quantitatively negligible. Intragenerational occupational mobility after marriage was uncommon. Trades and handicrafts were nearly always jobs for life, and not an ordinary stage in the family life cycle as in the German village of Neckarhausen (Sabeau 1990: p. 316-320). The Groningen clay area was a society with large economic differences within each village. However, social-cultural barriers between groups were not very high.

Most of the data presented relate to the Roman Catholic minority (some 6% of the population) for which a complete family reconstitution is available. The advantage of studying this group is that the researcher loose tracks only of children who migrate very far, as the regio analysed comprises 1,000 square kilometres and includes 150 small and large villages. For 18<sup>th</sup> century data, the quality and completeness of the database, which also contains information on occupations and land use is very good. A disadvantage is that larger farmers and indigent artisans (weavers and tailors often originated from the Catholic parts of nearby Westphalia) were slightly overrepresented in the Roman Catholic database, while farm workers were underrepresented (Paping and Collenteur 2004). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the demographic behaviour of the Groningen Roman Catholic minority (celibacy and age at marriage) does not seem to have differed a lot from that of the Protestant majority. Over time, it was also in accordance with the general population development of the region.

At first the problem of what social mobility can and can't show us about the gendered division of welfare and well-being in the past will be considered. Next, we will briefly go into the social structure scheme used. Then we pivot on the importance of succession from father upon son or daughter in the transfer of especially farms, but also of other positions. In the end the small role of succession will be related to the inheritance practices and the moment parental inheritances became at disposal.

### **Gender, social mobility, welfare and well-being**

The pursuit of equality of social-economic chances of the sexes is one of the main themes in modern western society. The suggestion usually is that these chances differed enormously in the past. In a sense that is very true. The division of labour was nearly completely gendered in western societies before 1900 and often (but not always) had more to do with customs than with gender differences in capabilities. Some tasks were reserved for males and others for females, and there were just a few tasks which were accepted to be accomplished by both sexes. This was either the case for household labour or for economically rewarded labour. Presumably, the division was more rigid in theory than in practice. Excess of males or females in specific situations forced men and women to perform female and male tasks respectively for efficiency reasons, for instance male farm tasks performed by a widow with only daughters on a small farm. Nevertheless, males and females had very different occupational prospects. For males a wide range of occupations were available, especially outside agriculture, while the possibilities for females were far more limited, and also these female occupations offered less economic rewards than comparable male occupations.

Gender differences resulted in a seemingly clear-cut division of male and female tasks after marriage. Males were the so-called providers, while females performed most of the 'non-economic' (reproduction) tasks within the household. The overwhelming incidence of this standard family model is indeed suggested in a lot of census lists in which married males are stated to have an occupation and most married females are reported as 'without occupation'. However, taking into account real life these occupational references point more to prevailing ideology than that they give a description of (economically rewarded) tasks performed, at least in the European countryside before 1900. Farmer and peasant wives had essential and specific tasks within agriculture. Labourers' wives did wage work in the summer half year, were in charge of small-scale gardening for self-provision and sometimes did temporary proto-industrial activities

as spinning and knitting. Outside agriculture it is a lot more difficult to generalise, the female share in economic activities seemed to have been less, except for proto-industry. Jobs were generally closely connected to specific capacities of the male provider (carpenter, schoolmaster), whereas females were not allowed to obtain these capabilities. However, wives of self-employed in the mostly small-scaled industry and services could for example be in charge of the shop or do supporting labour. Other possible economic activities of married females were again self-provisional agriculture and proto-industrial activities. Concluding, in the European countryside before 1900, married females had a significant - though supposedly smaller - share in the economically rewarded activities of the household members. Their economic labour was usually closely related to the occupation of their husband.

Not only did married females participate in the economic work performed by the household, they also benefited of the rewards consisting of the availability of food, drinks, fuel, shelter, furniture, cloths and more luxury goods within the household. At least for part of these benefits (fuel, shelter, furniture), it was extremely difficult to exclude married females to take advantage of them. Presumably, they also received a part of the rest of the benefits, for instance as their “rightful” share, as the outcome of some kind of marital negotiations, or perhaps even for reasons of (male) social prestige (cloths).

One of the largest problems of studying welfare positions of married females in the past is that it is nearly impossible to measure this position independent of that of their husbands. Occupational information on married females is extremely scarce, and if available usually relates directly to the occupation of the husband. However, taking into account the previous discussion this is not such a large problem. It is not necessary to measure the welfare position of married females independent of that of their husbands, because in practice these two were very closely related. The social-economic position of the husband can be considered a good proxy of the position of the wife, not only as an indicator of the kind of labour performed, but also of the social prestige and of the economic benefits of married females.

The possibilities to consume - as measured by the social economic position - are an indicator for material well-being. However, material well-being must not be confused with subjective notions as happiness or general well-being which are hard to measure objectively, even more so for the past. Well-being is a personal feeling inside an individual, which is nearly impossible to compare with the personal feelings of others. Economists consider (material) needs to be unlimited, and the more these needs are satisfied, the more utility an individual has. However, this last statement is bound to a specific time, place and subjective. Rising consumption possibilities do not necessarily increase well-being, because of the reference thrift (the personal

valuation of a specific consumption level falls if the consumption level of the reference group rises) and the preference thrift (the personal valuation of a specific consumption level falls if one becomes used to it).

Nevertheless, other things being equal one can suggest (taking into account unlimited wants) that a higher material consumption level results in a higher well-being than a lower material consumption level. Concluding, upward social mobility of males and females results in a higher well-being than downward social mobility on the individual level. This effect is even reinforced by the notion of the reference thrift, which suggests that falling behind the reference group (the paternal social-economic position) as is usual in cases of downward social mobility causes a sharp fall in utility. Social mobility is also in a less material way connected to well-being, inasmuch as higher social mobility suggest more room for males and females to create a life of their own, independent of their social background. This sense of freedom can increase general well-being. Positive is also that a higher social mobility will tend to redistribute people according to their capacities, which also will result in a general rise in well-being. However, it can be argued also that increasing social mobility provokes a rising feeling of insecurity and a general fall in well-being.

The occupational information can be used to compare the position of different women, but it is of course not suitable for comparing the gender-related differences between the quality of the social-economic positions of men and women. Usually in a gendered society perspectives and possibilities of males and females are more based on capabilities attributed generally to them than on personal qualities. Unfortunately, this gender-related discrepancy between capabilities and functionings (Robeyns 2007) is difficult to measure. For the past we can observe a glimpse of the functioning of people, but we are barely aware objectively of the relation of this functioning with specific capabilities and of personal intentions, which might have been even more important.

In every persons life there generally are a few crucial 'factors' which have a decisive impact on his or her fate in the future. These 'factors' comprise: 1. the social background one has; 2. the kind of education one receives. 3. the marriage partner one chooses. 4. the start of one's professional career. Clearly, all these factors are in someway or another interdependent and all are highly influential for the social position to be obtained later in life. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century the majority of the people only received primary education or even none at all. Much more important were the capabilities juveniles developed during their teens and early twenties. Also the securing of a good position after marriage was of primary importance, when commonly couples started a consumption unit and a business of their own (a production unit). To remain working as live-in servants (in large parts of the countryside a very usual phase in life for the poorer half of the

juveniles) wasn't an alternative (Schlumbohm 1994: p. 337-367; Paping 2005), while on the other hand the thought of settling down or staying in one of the parental homes seemed to be very unattractive for most of the newly-wed, considering the number of nuclear households in Western Europe (Laslett 1972; Hajnal 1983; Verdon 1979).

New couples resources to obtain a position comprise: 1. Savings of both bride and groom during their unmarried period; 2. Parental inheritances and dowries of both bride and groom (and possible other inheritances); 3. Working experiences of the groom and to a lesser extent of the bride; 4. Financial credibility of the couple necessary to borrow funds for investment in house and firm. A newly-wed couple needed money to buy a house, workshop or farm, and the capabilities to perform their new business in an appropriate way. If the female share in these resources was low there will be much more room for female than for male social mobility.

In theory, the new couple created with their own household an independent family economy. However, the example of the less 'modern' village of Neckarhausen (Sabeau 1990) shows that even in such cases the new couples could be tied to their still existing parental households, especially if most of their resources (land) were originally belonging to these parental households, and their strategies were directed towards the succession of the large family farm or towards the slow accumulation of land during the family life cycle, as in the Kempen in Belgium (Vanhaute 2004). Equal inheritances stimulated these kind of strategies, however, they can be seriously hampered by the indivisibility of the larger farms, as for example in Belm in German Westfalia (Schlumbohm 1994: 54).

### **Social structure and social mobility**

The Groningen clay area in the North of the Netherlands knew a very specific social structure already dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Due to specialisation some 40% of the inhabitants had their main revenues outside agriculture. The agricultural sector consisted of landless labourers and mostly quite wealthy farmers. Differences within the group of farmers mainly had to do with the amount of land in use. Only 10% of the land was controlled by the users themselves; some 40% was in the hand of nobles, rich farmers and salesmen; local and urban institutions, the provincial government, and patricians from the city of Groningen made up for the other half of the land. So 90% of the land was let to the farmers, mostly on long terms according to a specific system. This regional system of "beklemming" made it more difficult to expel farmers from the land from 1700 onwards. Farmers even were allowed to sell their right to use the land, but were prohibited

to divide it into parts. Around 1750 population started to grow, and this growth accelerated around 1785. By 1830 more than half as much inhabitants were living in this region. Population growth was accompanied by a rapid increase of farm worker families, while the number of farms was quite stable. The share of the other groups remained constant (Paping 1995).

It is difficult to measure social status exactly with only information on occupations. Fortunately, we know the size of nearly all the farms to split the amorphous group farmers in categories. About a quarter of the farms had a size of between 5 and 15 hectare. About a third of the farms was between 15 and 30 hectare, while some 40% was above 30 hectare (Paping 1995: 71). Because of the system of “beklemmingen” the right to use the land was priced in Groningen and also the larger the amount of land controlled the higher the necessary investments on livestock, equipment, buildings etc. Accordingly there was a strong relation between the amount of land used and the (gross) wealth of a household. The group of labourers can be split into two: a small one using 1 to 5 hectare, and the majority having no substantial plots of land at their disposal. Occupations outside agriculture were fit into this five-category scheme, taking into account the necessary investments for specific jobs, using information from tax records and probate inventories.

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*Table 1.* Social stratification of heads of households for the Groningen countryside in the 18<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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| A. | 1. Large farmers (30 hectare and over), land owners, nobles.<br>2. Large salesmen, higher officials, large factory owners; physicians, millers etc. controlling more than 5 hectare.  |
| B. | 1. Medium-ranged farmers (15 to 30 hectare).<br>2. Medium-ranged salesmen, large shopkeepers and inn-keepers, physicians, millers, small factory owners, medium-ranged officials, ship-captains; artisans and others controlling more than 3 hectare. |
| C. | 1. Small farmers (5 to 15 hectare).<br>2. Artisans with a workshop (bakers, smiths, cartwrights, glaziers, coppersmiths, shoemakers), small shopkeepers and inn-keepers, master of a barge, lower officials.  |
| D. | 1. Crofters and farm labourers controlling 1 to 5 hectare, milkmen, gardeners.<br>2. Artisans without a real workshop (tailors, carpenters), weavers, pedlars, commission agents, carriers without land, police men.                                  |
| E. | 1. Farm labourers.<br>2. Lower skilled subordinate workers in handicrafts and services; servants, paupers, soldiers.  |
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Schluhmböhm (1994: 370-376) finds for the village of Belm in Westphalia using a four level division, that 76% of the females and 83% of the males marrying between 1771 and 1860 remained in the same class. Table 2 shows that male and female 18<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholics in the Ommelanden were relatively much more mobile. If we do not take the 10% cases of people



moving out of the research area into account, we have 1,660 cases left. Of these 34% experienced downward social mobility, while 20% managed to secure a higher position than their parents. This trend towards downward social mobility is not surprising, regarding the proletarianisation taking place from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The share of higher positions (A and B) connected with controlling large plots of land was falling, while the share of labourers (E) was increasing. High classes had more surviving children which reinforced this tendency towards downward mobility. For the couples with off-spring (N=771) the number of children surviving till marriage or till the age of 30 was 2,9 for groups A and B, while it was 2,5 for groups D and E.

*Table 2. Social mobility of married Roman Catholics born between 1721 and 1800 in the Groningen Ommelanden.*

	PARENTS					Total
	A: Nobility, upper middle class and large farmers	B: Middle class and medium-ranged farmers	C: Lower middle class and small farmers	D: Indigent artisans and crofters	E: Subordinate and unskilled labourers	
CHILDREN						
A	53%	16%	3%	2%	1%	15%
B	23%	24%	12%	3%	3%	13%
C	10%	28%	33%	19%	12%	21%
D	3%	14%	20%	45%	24%	22%
E	4%	11%	17%	20%	54%	20%
Left the Ommelanden	6%	7%	15%	12%	6%	10%
Total	(20%)	(18%)	(23%)	(24%)	(16%)	N = 1,838

*Source:* Groningen Roman Catholic Dataset. Social positions are measured about ten years after marriage.

Continuity under the richest inhabitants was only limited. Nearly half of the children had to accept a lower position, mainly these were children of large farmers who themselves began a trade or managed only a medium-ranged farm. The enormous fall from a large and wealthy farm or business to living on the edge of poverty (D and E) was experienced by 7% of their children. Poverty wasn't far away for anyone outside the noble class. However, it weren't lack of chances (e.g. large farms) which explained the high downward mobility of the children of the wealthy. Nearly a third of the people securing a position on the top, were of lower origin. Mainly this were children of medium-ranged farmers and better-off artisans and shopkeepers.

There were no large differences in social mobility between males and females in the Groningen Ommelanden. Females were only a little bit more mobile, which tend to result in a marginal higher female risk of downward social mobility. The easiest ladder to upward mobility,

namely marriages with partners from higher classes and compulsory marriages worked in nearly the same way for males and females. Because the occupation of a large part of the middle class outside agriculture were connected to skills of males (carpenters, smiths, weavers, tailors) and sons usually learned these skills as apprentice of their father, males clung more to the occupation of their father and were somewhat less mobile socially. However, even for males this was a very open society with more than half ending up in a different social position as their parents.

*Table 3.* The number of social classes risen or fallen (N= 1,660).

	+4	+3	+2	+1	Equal	-1	-2	-3	-4
Males	0%	1%	4%	13%	49%	20%	8%	3%	1%
Females	0%	1%	3%	16%	43%	22%	11%	2%	1%
Total	0%	1%	4%	15%	46%	21%	9%	3%	1%

*Source:* See table 2.

Some simple correlations were made to explain the number of social levels individuals fell or rose. However, few meaningful relations were found. Change over time, gender and age at marriage proved not significant, as was the age the father died or the age the mother died. Only the number of surviving female children in the parental family had a very weak detrimental effect ( $r=0.089$ ;  $n=1,691$ ) on mobility, suggesting that having too much female children was somehow a burden for family perspectives, possibly because of lower female productive and income capacity.

Other factors than social background played an important role in the obtaining of social positions in the Groningen Ommelanden. Social positions were not at all secure from one generation to the next; there were chances, but much greater were the risks. Incompetence in this market-oriented society was heavily punished by a social fall. Under these circumstances the capabilities of both groom and bride was of great importance. Downward social mobility as measured in this paper can be blamed to parents or to children, because we measured the social position of each couple (parent or child) in the first 10 years after marriage. Some of the downward mobility was an inheritance of a previous social fall of the parents; however, most of it was indeed the result of the inadequacy of the sons and daughters to secure the same level as their father and mother. Of course it has to be remarked that in the crucial years between the age of 12 and marriage, choices of parents, next to choices, behaviour and qualities of children played a

mayor role in the acquiring of skills, funds, credibility and a social network, necessary to achieve success in a market-oriented society.

One can argue that high social mobility based on personal achievements which leads individuals and couples to social positions better fitted for them, is beneficial for economic growth. It would go too far to say that in the Groningen clay area only capacities and skills counted, however, the region must have indeed benefited from certain tendencies to a more efficient division of work between couples taking into account not only inherited social resources, but also personal qualities of both sexes.

## Succession

In theory, most of the positions in the social stratification can be handed over to a child, as is the case for farms, land, shops, workshops, ships and more difficult regular subordinate positions. Even a position of a regular farm labourer could be handed over, and though this was presumably unusual, at least the labourer's house can be transferred. The large social mobility in the Groningen Ommelanden, however, does not point to an enormous preference of the transfer of property and position via succession from father to son (or even daughter). To illuminate this table 4 gives data on the transfer of farmsteads. There is not much difference between the figures for the Roman Catholics and for Kloosterburen and Wierhuizen. Inasmuch as the Roman Catholics only formed one third of the population in these parishes, they indeed seem quite representative for the whole population.

*Table 4.* The transfer of farms in the Groningen Ommelanden, ca. 1710 –ca. 1820.

	Roman Catholic farmer couples marrying 1701-1780 (last farm only)	All transfers of farms in Kloosterburen and Wierhuizen 1721-1820
To daughter	13%	13%
To son	19%	17%
Widow remarrying	18%	15%
Widower remarrying	15%	9%
Inherited by other related persons	1%	2%
Sold	34%	44%
N	340	184

*Source:* Groningen Roman Catholic Dataset; Database on the use of land in the eastern Marne, 1591-1830.

Goody (1973) calculates that about three quarter of the families with surviving children have sons to succeed. For instance in 19<sup>th</sup> century Löhne in Westphalia indeed two third of the successors were sons, and possibly even more important, succession was the usual way to transfer farmsteads (Fertig 2003). However, succession by children in the Groningen Ommelanden made up only a third of all the transfers and from these transfers a high 40% went to succeeding daughters, which made male succession less significant compared to elsewhere. Jan Benes and Aafke used a provincial farm of 20 hectare in Westerwijtwerd in Groningen in the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Their children sold the farm in 1725 to their newly-wed sister Lutje Jans. She and her husband lived for a very long time, and in the end they were succeeded by their youngest daughter, who afterwards married in 1784 at the age of 35 with Hibbe Folkerts, a son of a farmer of about the equal size. After her death in 1820 her son and daughter succeeded. Only the son married in 1829, and he sold the family farm in 1847 to strangers.

An interesting case is Wiske Aries, single and 45, who was allowed to take over in 1778 the large farm of Piloersema, previously a very small castle or 'borg', after the death of her mother, despite the availability of four older brothers, from which the oldest was also unmarried. Only after Wiske's death her single oldest brother bought the farm of 53 hectare from the other heirs. The others were not interested, because they already acquired large farms previously, one by marrying a heir, one by marrying a widow and one by buying a farm. However, usually daughters and sons were already married at the moment they took over the parental farm. About 9% of the males and 6% of the females reaching the age of 30 never married, however under the three most wealthy social groups female celibacy was only 4% suggesting these daughters to be attractive partners with a huge preference for marriage. Celibacy, however, did not play an important role in making the succession of a married brother easier as elsewhere. In some cases an unmarried child like the example of Wiske Aries took over the household while the married ones had moved elsewhere.

Very important was that the surviving partner of a farmer couple often remarried and stayed on the farm as in Belm in Germany (Schlumbohm 1994: 451-480, in opposition to Belm children from the first marriage did not have any special rights in the Ommelanden). The handing over of the farm to a new generation could in this way be delayed for decades. An extreme but illuminating example is Papekop in Usquert (41 hectare). In 1732 Jacob Pieters Bos married Trinje Tewes, and they acquired this farm. He remarried Jakomina Klaasen in 1758. Jakomina remarried Jacob Jans Bos in 1766. Jacob remarried Trinje Willems in 1769. Trinje remarried Renje Berents Bos in 1786. Renje remarried Martha Freerks in 1798. In 1816 the farm is sold. Widows and widowers with a farm were, despite their age, attractive marriage partners in the

Ommelanden. Table 4 suggests that widows were more inclined to remarry than widowers. However, this higher incidence has to be attributed to the higher availability of widows (table 5) due to marital age differences, a lower mortality of women and a tendency to post mortem succession. There is absolutely no sign that widows disposed rapidly of the farms after the death of their husband. On the contrary, they seemed to have been perfectly capable to run these – mostly large – farms using the labour of unmarried children or live-in servants, and they knew it.

*Table 5. Civil status of heads of households of the 28 farms in Kloosterburen, 1800-1830.*

Couples	widows	widowers	Unmarried	N
79%	13%	7%	1%	760 years

*Source:* Database on the use land of land in the eastern Marne, 1591-1830.

About a third of the farms were sold to non-relatives mainly somewhere at the end of the family life cycle, which was very high if compared to Belm in Germany, where between 1711 and 1860: 38% of the farms went to males heirs, 13% to female heirs, 36% to remarrying widows and widowers, and only 13% to others (Schlumbohm 1994: 385). The same difference in the incidence of selling to non-relatives exists with German Neckarhausen, where most of the plots of land were sold to relatives and not to strangers (Sabeau 1990: 373-415). In their study of two parishes in southern Sweden in the period 1720-1840, Dribe and Lundh (2005) also find only a few non-relatives and a lot of sons and daughters succeeding after the death of a widow or widower. Succession practices in the Groningen Ommelanden seem to have been quite exceptional for continental Europe, which has to be related to the very modern economy this rural region had in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Medieval law in rural Groningen laid heavy weight on the continuity of land and the transfer of property through (male) lineages as we will see. Perhaps there were still cultural ideas about the necessity to hand over farms to the next male generation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but the practice had become completely different.

Several specific reasons can be discerned for selling farms. One is that the parents became old and wanted to retire. Derk Sjabbes (1697-1777) and Aaltje Klaasen (1708-1782) sold their 40 hectare farm in Zuidwolde to strangers in May 1770 for 4,000 guilders, despite having three sons and two daughters. They bought a nice house in nearby Bedum. All their children met with difficulties in remaining on the level of their parents, some acquired smaller farms. One daughter married in February of the same year, and bought with her husband a 22 hectare farm in April. Another reason to sell is that both parents deceased when the children were still too young

to take over. However, in case one of the marriage partners died young the surviving partner usually remarried. More often, the farm was sold by the heirs after the death of the last parent, sometimes to one of the heirs, but also to strangers. In 1782 two married and three unmarried children of Freerk Jans and Martje Jacobs sold their farm in Westerklooster with 21 hectare to the unrelated and newly-wed Folkert Willems and Jeike Hindriks. In a lot of cases no children at all survived till maturity, sometimes relatives took over the farm, but most of the time the heirs sold the farm.

Folkert Willems is also a good illustration of another reason to sell a farm, namely debts. He had to sell his farm in 1807, having serious money problems for some time. Possibly his incapability to pay his children their maternal inheritance - which was obligatory at the moment of remarriage - was an important reason for living in concubinate for a long period, a few years before. Folkert ended his life as a farm labourer and seasonal butcher. Another important reason for selling farms was the obtaining of a different farm. Usually the new farm (bought or inherited) was bigger, there are also a few examples that farmers sold their own farm and bought a smaller one to escape from bankruptcy.

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*Table 6.* Sons and daughters of Ommelanden Roman Catholics (born 1721-1800) taking over the household of parents or other relatives as heirs before or within 10 years after marriage.

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	Sons	N	Daughters	N
A: Nobility, upper middle class and large farmers	22%	185	14%	191
B: Middle middle class and medium-ranged farmers	14%	157	8%	171
C: Lower middle class and small farmers	17%	168	4%	238
D: Indigent artisans and crofters	21%	204	11%	224
E: Subordinate and unskilled labourers	11%	122	6%	162
Total	18%	836	9%	986

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*Source:* Groningen Roman Catholic Dataset.

Table 6 shows that actually for all social groups succession was not the prime way to obtain a social position. Not only the farms, but also shops, workshops and labourers houses were handed over to unrelated people. The reasons are the same as for farms. Social positions of the middle class and the farm labourers mostly were not available when their off-spring wanted to marry. The children were definitely not inclined to wait for it, and the parents were not prepared to give them up early. When the last of the parents died it was often too late for one of the children to return, inasmuch as that they already settled elsewhere in a definitive way.

It has to be taken into account that table 6 suggests a lower significance of succession than reality. Just one partner of a couple had to bring in a parental position. Still, nearly three quarter of the couples did not take over of one of the parental households. It has to be remarked that succession of children was least rare under the rich farmers in group A and the indigent weavers and tailors in group D. In the last category it were mostly males who followed in the footsteps of their father, stimulated by the gendered division of handicraft labour obstructing the handing over of the necessary capabilities to daughters. In conclusion 18% of the males, but only 9% of the females were able to take over the parental household, somewhere before or after marriage. This difference more than explains the 6% difference in social mobility between males and females.

### **Inheritances: rules and reality**

Females were only slightly more upward and downward mobile, which means that the social position of females from generation to generation was nearly as secure as that of males. Partly, these small differences can be explained by the legal customs of the Groningen clay area. In the Groningen countryside, the old medieval law used stated that a son ought to receive twice as much of the immovables as a daughter. However, the practice had become completely differently; during the 17<sup>th</sup> and even more in the 18<sup>th</sup> century a lot of marriage contracts were concluded between the more prosperous inhabitants of the Groningen Ommelanden. Nearly always the bride and groom decided to make sons and daughters of this marriage equal in all their rights (“gelijke sibbe”), which meant that they inherited the same share. The same provision can be found in last wills. Even if there wasn’t a marriage contract the equal division of inheritances between sons and daughters (or more distant female and male relatives) was the ordinary practice. Equal division between sons and daughters was also usual in the other parts of the wealthy Dutch coastal area (for instance Hoppenbrouwers 1992; Van Cruyningen 2000). Only some of the Groningen nobles persisted in the unequal division of inheritances, which seemed to have been a strategy to avoid impoverishment of the family in case of too much off-spring. The system of equal inheritances combined with impartibility of the resources can also be found in large parts of France, Spain, Italy and Belgium (Thirsk 1976). In the less modern eastern parts of the Netherlands the (usually male) successor was heavily favoured compared to the other heirs (De Haan 1994).

Around the age of 25 (sometimes even at 20) orphaned boys and girls received “*veniam aetatis*”, which meant that they got the permission to act independently. Unmarried females had just the same rights as males. However, if women married, they came under the guard of their husband. Married women were not seen as capable to agree on economic transfers concerning property, without permission of their husband. However, the opposite was in practice also the case. If married men transferred property or borrowed money, usually their wife was present, and if she wasn't, it was explicitly stated that he also acted on her behalf. Unless stated otherwise in a marriage contract, all possessions were shared equally by bride and groom.

Widowed women and men could act nearly independent, also because they were the legitimate guard (“*legitimi tutrix*”) of their adolescent children. If sons and daughters were adult they had (as heirs of their deceased father or mother) to give consent for transfers of property. In case one of the parents remarried three male guards were legally appointed, ideally one from the paternal family, one from the maternal family and one external (usually a neighbour). Unless otherwise stated in the marriage contract the children received half the wealth of their parents to be paid to them (or better their guards) when they were 18 years old. At the age of 18 the children were seen as economically independent of their parents, which also meant that they were able to save money from their wages (Paping 2004). Usually the remaining parent borrowed the money from the guards after the children had become 18.

If the surviving parent did not remarry, he or she usually had the usufruct of the whole inheritance. The parental inheritance was divided after his or her death. If we take the ideal family for the transfer of property broadly as consisting of 1 or 2 children, than 51% of the Roman Catholic families in the Ommelanden with off-spring (N=771) fit into this model. However in 49% of the families the inheritance had to be divided into at least three portions: 21% in three, 13% in four and the rest in even more parts. In one quarter of these cases were their only daughters, a figure which partly but not completely explains that a third of the successors were daughters. We have already seen that even when sons were available daughters could succeed. There are no reasons to believe that patterns differed for the Protestant majority.

From the point of view of the children the extent of division of the inheritances was much more negative: 11% was the only surviving child, 17% had to divide the inheritance in two, 24% in three, 19% in four, 16% in five parts, and the remaining 13% in six or more parts. So, for the majority of the children the parental inheritance (if any) was too low to secure the same position as the parents had. We already mentioned that only the number of daughters had a small detrimental effect on the social mobility of the children in a family. For the rest the number of siblings had no statistically significant effect on the social mobility chances. This suggests that



the size of the partitioning of the parental inheritance wasn't that important at all for social success or failure. Even for farmers the number of siblings proved to be not important for the chances on social success, only the perspectives of the few only farmer children were more positive. The insignificance of the size of the parental inheritance is remarkable, taking into account that large farms were bought and sold for huge amounts of money. Nevertheless, much effort was made to divide the inheritance as equal as possible, making an inventory of all the possessions and estimating their value, just as in for example Neckarhausen (Sabeau 1990: 193-198, 249-256).

Money was important. However, if one did not have it, one borrowed it, and nearly every new couple of farmers, merchants, or substantial artisans turned to this strategy made possible by a well functioning credit system. Of course the availability of own capital eased the obtaining of loans, but the social network, the accompanying financial credibility and personal capacities did too. The direct availability of inherited capital can not have been too important, two third of the Roman Catholics received their complete inheritance being 30 year or even a lot older, while the median age at first marriage was about 28 for males and 25 for females, most people marrying had still one or even both parents.

It has been suggested that the high age at marriage in Western Europe has something to do with people waiting for a position - the so-called niche-hypothesis - or for having the possibility to create a new position (Hofstee 1954; Hajnal 1965; for critical notes: Van Poppel 1992; Fertig 2005; Zeitlhofer 2003). Clearly, in the Groningen Ommelanden couples usually did not wait with marrying till the death of their parents, in order to be able to take over their position or to use the inheritance in cash to ease the obtaining of a position elsewhere. There was nearly no relation between marriage dates and the death of the last parent. Considering this, it is not surprising that direct succession from one generation to the next was of limited importance. Parents were not prepared to give up their position if they were able to keep them, and until their seventies most of them were. Even if physically incapable to work, unmarried servants could be hired to do the job, so retirement was unnecessary and unattractive. On the other hand, most married children were not inclined to stay for a long period in the parental household, waiting for an event (the death of the last parent) which still could take a long time. Only a minority remained at the parental home, to take it over in due time, so it is not appropriate to speak of a stem-family system as for instance in the highlands of South-East Norway or the Pyrenean valleys (Fauve-Chamoux 2006).

The result of the comparatively low incidence of succession was that the buying of a position (farm, workshop, house) became the most attractive solution for newly-wed in the

Ommelanden. The availability of inheritances, dowries and parental loans of both bride and groom were of great importance to establish such a good position. However, taking into account the high social mobility more personally based capabilities (skills, qualities and credibility) of the two marriage partners not directly related to social background were just as important, and a factor far more relevant than in less mobile societies.

## **Conclusion**

In the Groningen Ommelanden equal inheritances were combined with the indivisibility of farms, workshops and houses. In this modern market-oriented society parental succession played a remarkable small role. Succession by a child was just one of the options to transfer farms and other positions. Also differences in the financial treatment between sons and daughters were comparatively small. However, about twice as many sons as daughters were able to succeed their parents, partly because of the gendered transfer of some specific job capabilities, but also because of a slight but by no way exclusive preference for a male successor. The result of the low succession rates was an open society with high intergenerational social mobility. This high mobility was partly triggered by the discrepancy between the moment of marrying and the moment children received the parental inheritance. As a result most newly-wed couples had to secure a position on their own as cohabitation with parents was generally not preferred. Both male and female resources must have been of great importance in this process of securing a position. Next to social background, personal capabilities of both males and females were decisive in the quest for a good position as the near equality of male and female social mobility suggests. In this modern money economy social background alone could not safeguard people from social failure due to their own incompetence. There was always the threat of downward social mobility.

The openness of society and the near equality of the sexes in the transfer of material resources (but still not of labour capabilities) will presumably be closely related to the wealth and relatively modern economic and social structure of the Groningen Ommelanden, which can be seen as a good example for 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century modern capitalistic European regions. However, the countryside of most of continental Europe had quite different characteristics. Further research is necessary to compare these results with more traditional regions. Questions to be addressed more extensively are: was social mobility indeed considerably lower in more traditional and less capitalistic parts of the countryside? Were succession and gender of more importance elsewhere,

while personal qualities unrelated to social background were less? Furthermore, one can ask if the disadvantage of the loss of security ,because of the growing importance of market forces in the lives of people, is compensated by the growing chances people have, and the resulting overall higher level of economic welfare? It can indeed be argued that a general movement in the direction of modern social-economic relations – as we already find in the Groningen clay area in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – in which not only social background and gender, but also other more personal capabilities explain social and economic chances, belongs to the core of the explanation of the economic success of Western society in the last centuries.

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